

EATING ETHICALLY
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All right...I know what many of you are thinking right now, you're thinking: "OUR NEW MINISTER IS A VERY MEAN MAN! After all, here it is, just a week after the winter holidays (when we have – almost to the last man and woman – over-indulged with favorite – and yes, frequently fattening – foods right through the wonderful culinary traditions of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's...(and as I mentioned last Sunday, the fact is that each year the average American gains 7 pounds in the month between Thanksgiving and New Year's)...and all Scott can do is get up in the pulpit and focus on the guilt-inducing, joyless topic 'Eating Ethically'...thanks a lot!"

Actually, dear friends, I don't have a mean bone in my body...well, at least not any that are *really* mean! Besides, when you think about it, my timing (rather than being heartless or cruel) is actually pretty appropriate and helpful. For this is the time of the year – the logical time of the year as we flip from one calendar to the next – when many of us take stock of various aspects of our living, and in fact choose to make New Year's resolutions, resolutions often about our relationship with diet and exercise, when we promise ourselves (right after this long season of abundant eating and lounging around the house) to be more prudent and disciplined about how we care for our bodies! What better time, I ask you, to spend a few minutes reflecting on the duty we all share to eat ethically, wisely and well?

Now look...as a minister, I am fully aware that I am wading into dangerous waters with you this morning. Eating is a very personal, powerful, primordial (and sometimes even painful) topic for all of us. Eating is one of life's simplest and most routine pleasures – not to mention necessities! We all do it several times a day when our bodies tell us they are hungry...we all have taste buds that draw us ravenously to foods and flavors we personally like...we all have eating habits (both good and bad) that have a powerful grip on us...and I venture to guess there is not a person in this room right now who does not have at least a little guilt, shame or regret about some aspect of how or what they eat. Take me for example...just because I am a relatively thin person who cycles like crazy every day doesn't mean that I always eat responsibly and right. I have several dietary habits I'm not at all proud of...and no, I'm not telling you what they all are...but I will confess (just by way of abstract example) that I do like chocolate milk shakes from McDonalds, OK? Come on, be honest with yourself...what do you love to eat that you know is not good for you...I'll bet you all have at least one wicked indulgence when it comes to food???

Look, the truth is we all eat stuff we know we shouldn't. There is an old church joke in the South, that whenever a minister preaches about a topic about which the congregants are sensitive, someone will inevitably say to the clergyperson, "*Well Parson...now you've crossed over from preachin' to meddlin'!*" Believe me, friends, I don't want to meddle in your lives this morning. But this did seem like the perfect Sunday for us to reflect together on what it might mean for us to eat more responsibly and right...for it is important for us all to eat as ethically as we can.

So...let's talk about food, shall we?

You know, food in America today has gotten downright amazing! When I was growing up in Wisconsin during the 1950's, grocery stores were pretty simple affairs, with not a whole lot of

fresh produce or fish or exotic meat products. But today, when I go into my favorite Publix or Whole Foods supermarket, I have at my fingertips almost every appealing food stuff known to humanity, flown in (much of it) from huge industrial farms (a serious problem I will talk about later in the sermon) from all over the country and world, presented perfectly and appealingly to me – in bright, clean, wide and colorful aisles – for me to simply put in the cart and take home.

As an American consumer, I can regularly find everything from kumquats to quail eggs...tiger shrimp to teriyaki tofu...artichokes to anchovies...a nearly infinite variety of things with which to satisfy every culinary whim. Now granted, some of this fresh and exquisite food is quite expensive, for some of us perhaps occasionally prohibitively so. But the truth of the matter is most of us here on the Treasure Coast are blessed with enough personal and discretionary income to take home pretty much everything and anything we want to eat. Our grandparents would be amazed by the food choices (and abundance thereof) we have!

The problem – of course – is that all this abundance of pleasing things to eat comes with some huge human costs...first and foremost perhaps, the incredible costs that the growing epidemic of American obesity and cardiovascular disease which everyone (from nutritionists to social scientists) is talking about in dire terms. Medical demographers now predict that – reversing a centuries-old-trend – American kids growing up today will have shorter life expectancies than their parents...dying younger simply because of how and what they eat, and eat to excess. The truth is many Americans – young and old, rich and poor, black and white – are literally eating themselves to death. The bottom line is that all this American abundance of food and food choices has incredible – and in many cases largely hidden – costs for each one of us as individuals...and incredible – and in many cases largely hidden – costs for humanity and our planet as a whole...and this is where the duty for all of us to eat more ethically comes in.

It seems to me that we must learn to eat more ethically in both the micro and the macro spheres of our lives:

- 1) THE MICRO SPHERE where we pay personal attention to the health and sustainability of our own individual body, this marvelously constructed organism which enables us to move through life, and
- 2) THE MACRO SPHERE where we together, as interconnected citizens of earth, pay attention to the health and sustainability of our planet, and the whole of the human family which lives upon it.

As I got deeper into this topic of eating ethically, the thing I came to realize is that, generally speaking, when it comes to the foods we eat, what is good for 1) our individual bodies is also good for 2) the whole planet and human family. So, again generally speaking, when we eat responsibly for ourselves, we are also eating responsibly for the whole of humanity and creation! I realize that's a lot to think about, so let's break this all down a bit, and address, in turn, both the MICRO and the MACRO spheres of ethical eating.

First, there is THE MICRO LEVEL...the obvious ethical responsibility each of us has to eat responsibly and right in order to sustain our own bodies and lives in healthy and productive ways. I take it as a matter of faith that every human being (each and every one of us) should appreciate – and utilize and protect and enjoy as best we can – this great gift of life we each have been given...and one key aspect of that is eating wisely and prudently in ways that enable us to maintain our personal physical health and fitness. Now, the bummer here is that a lot of what we know is best for our bodies – fresh and organic fruits and vegetables...simple,

wholesome grains and nuts...and almost anything naturally prepared with little or no saturated fat...you all know the list! – is not always as tasty or satisfying as the stuff that is not so good for our bodies – rich and fatty meats, eggs and cheeses...sweet treats made with mounds of sugar...processed foods loaded with salt, calories and fat...where's that empty grocery cart of mine!...you all know the list of bad things we adore! I suspect there is a relatively small percentage of you sitting out there this morning who are health-conscious vegan or vegetarian ...actually let me see a show of hands, because I honestly have no idea and am curious...how many of you in the congregation this morning are vegans or vegetarians, or virtually so?

The obvious and powerful truth is that you vegans and vegetarians (even if you are not “totally pure”) are eating much more wisely, healthfully and, yes, ethically than the rest of us. As Howard Lyman writes in the forward of this important Book, “Vegan: the New Ethics of Eating” by Eric Marcus (a book I recommend, incidentally): “Almost 70 percent of all Americans are dying from ailments associated with their diets. About half of us will die of one thing: heart disease. Another third of all Americans will have cancer [much of it diet related] and one-quarter will die of it. Study after study proves the inseparable link between diet and health. If we expect to lead long and healthy lives, we can no longer afford to stick our heads in the sand. However, the American people can change the odds dramatically if they adopt two very simple practices: refrain from eating animal products and spend the grocery budget on organically produced fruits and vegetables... [A recent study] has shown that a group of [American men with vegetarian diets] lived about 7 years longer than their meat-eating counterparts. Studies in Germany and Finland also have shown that people who eat no animal products may live an additional 15 years over the animal-eating population.” And as Eric Marcus succinctly puts it later in the book, “A vegan diet is most in harmony with our bodies’ needs...moving to a plant-based diet is comparatively easy and it opens the door to a gentler, healthier and happier way of being.”

Now...I'm no nutritionist, but I know enough about diet and health to know vegetarian evangelists like Mr. Lyman are undoubtedly right! Like the truth or not, we human beings are far better off health-wise when we don't eat meat and cheese and eggs and milk. And thus I unwittingly arrive at the place in my sermon where my own research and common sense leads me to – a place that even I don't want to be!

As an omnivorous person (and good old, warm-blooded Wisconsin boy who grew up on a hearty, rich – and steady – diet of meat and potatoes) – who has spent my whole life eating and enjoying meat and cheese and eggs and other fatty/wicked stuff – I intellectually and ethically know that switching to being a vegan or vegetarian (even an approximate one) would be far healthier for me personally, not to mention more compassionate toward the animals and more responsibly environmentally – and again, more on that in a moment. But because I like my old, familiar and comfortable eating habits, I also doubt – no, I know! honestly – that I will not achieve this dietary discipline anytime soon. The truth is that when it comes to my personal diet, I'm an old dog who doesn't really want to learn new tricks – even though I know it would be much better for my health and longevity for me to do so!

In spite of what I intellectually know is best for me and the planet, I am quite attached to the familiar, delicious diet I am used to, and know I would have a hard time giving up so many foods, including those that involve various tasty meats – beef, pork, chicken and lamb that I have fiercely enjoyed for my entire life.

So...i will confess to you that even though I know that moving to a meatless (or nearly meatless) diet is “the right thing to do”... I doubt I'm going to get there anytime soon...and I suspect that many of you find yourself in the same uncomfortable and irrational boat! So...as a serious

religious person who tries to take life's ethical imperatives seriously, it nonetheless looks like – for the time being at least – I'm going to continue to live my life with some rather significant ethical dissonance between:

- 1) what I know is best for me and creation, and
- 2) how I actually behave.

But this personal admission that I'm a bit stuck here in an old familiar diet does not mean that I am not going to try to move myself and my diet to a more ethical (and healthy) place. What I have decided to do – for now at least...at this time in my life when I am not prepared to take the full, bold, responsible leap into a pure, vegetarian way of life – is that I will try to significantly reduce the amount of animal products and fats and sugars in my diet...to regularly practice meatless days...and regularly eat smaller portions of meat and cheese and eggs...and move my diet in a healthier, more sustainable direction. Not only will this intentional shift in my diet be better for my body and my personal future as a human being, we also know that, for a host of intersecting reasons, it will also be better for the future of our planet and human family.

And thus I arrive at the macro level of eating ethically...where this whole topic gets really complicated. But to begin to unpack all the intricacies here, let's go back for a moment to the American supermarket. When I go into my favorite Publix store, the fact is that most of the wonderful, appealing foods I find there are the products of huge industrial agriculture enterprises from all around the world. In my grandparents' day, most of the food they ate in rural Wisconsin, except for a few canned items, were produced locally or regionally, in small to mid-sized, largely organic, self-sustaining, minimally polluting family farms – like the one they ran outside of Wausau. A hundred years ago, on most local farms in America, a variety of crops and animals were raised for immediate human consumption, including small numbers of cattle, hogs and chickens who – with room to roam...and whose waste was used as local fertilizer – were given both natural foods and humane treatment. But now, the food (even most of the fish!) we consume is largely produced by huge industrial operations, which are increasingly destructive to the environment, and responsible for a great deal of animal suffering.

The example of how we produce beef on the planet tells the whole, sad story. I quote now from the sobering Beyond Beef campaign, which is trying to persuade humanity that it can no longer morally afford to rely so heavily on this food source:

“Most people know that beef consumption plays a major role in the development of heart disease, strokes and cancer. But the over-consumption of beef is also a major cause of human hunger and poverty, deforestation, spreading deserts, water pollution, water scarcity, global warming, species extinction, and animal suffering.... We in the United States are a big part of the problem.... The beef addiction of the United States and other industrialized nations has set off a global food crisis. Today [the world's 1.3 billion] cattle are being fed precious grain [industrial cattle operations use up to 15 pounds of grain to produce just one pound of beef] so that [we] can enjoy the pleasures of “marbled” beef. Meanwhile, nearly one billion people suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and between 40 and 50 million people die every year from starvation and related diseases. We could provide proper nourishment to more than a billion people if we used the world's agricultural lands for human consumption rather than feed for cattle ...

“Forests, particularly the rain forests of Central [and South] America [and elsewhere around the world] are being burned and cleared to make way for cattle pasture.... Today, the world's 1.3 billion cattle are stripping vegetation and compacting and eroding soil, thus creating deserts out of grasslands. Cattle production...accounts for a significant percentage of pollutants in [the

planet's] rivers, lakes, streams and aquifers.... The grain-fed cattle complex is a significant factor in global warming. The world's 1.3 billion cattle emit 60 millions tons of methane through their digestive systems each year which produces more global warming than all the world's cars, buses, trucks, and airplanes combined! What's more, the toxic petrochemical fertilizers [used by the beef industry to grow grain for the cattle produce] vast amounts of nitrous oxide which also significantly warms our earth's atmosphere.

"Beef production is contributing significantly to the dramatic loss of biodiversity, including species extinction now occurring across the globe...[and] cattle are exposed to harsh living conditions, rough handling, and often outright abuse and cruelty throughout their short lives.... Animals transported to feedlots and slaughterhouses are often shocked with electric prods, beaten, kicked, dragged and deprived of food and water for long periods. [For all these reasons], Beyond Beef is asking people to cut their beef consumption in half, and encouraging consumers to demand humanely and sustainably raised beef...on small, local, sustainable, ecologically balanced farms.

"It seems obvious that the beef industry is probably the worst and most obvious example of the harm that industrial agriculture is doing to our planet, but the fact is that an increasingly large percentage of all the foodstuffs we eat (fruits, vegetables, grains, and meats of both land and sea) are produced by vast, mechanical operations which do serious harm to our globe's natural environment, and cause a great deal of human and animal suffering. Another painful example of the destructive power of industrial agriculture is the impending extinction of wild salmon in the Pacific Northwest...that is occurring because the wild salmon are not able to defend themselves against the parasitic sea lice, which thrive in the unhealthy, crowded pens of farm-raised salmon, and then move into the surrounding environment to kill all the wild fish."

To enable us to eat more ethically, then, we must begin to insist – both as consumers and citizens – that those who produce food for us do so in much more ecologically responsible, sustainable, and humane ways. This, of course, is an incredibly tall order. The industrial agricultural complex – that we in the industrialized West have come to depend on for our food supply – has been taking shape for almost a century, and is very powerful both politically and economically. Consumers have gotten quite used to the attractive and relatively inexpensive products they provide us. But there is a growing movement (I have some cousins living on a small, organic farm in Wisconsin who are passionately devoted to this) for Americans to eat local products raised by small, sustainable, organic, non-polluting, and diverse-crop farms.

My cousins, for example, for a cooperative fee, deliver a bag full of varied foods they organically grow to several dozen local families every week in the summer and autumn...and such local food cooperatives, as you know, are springing up in increasing and positive numbers here in Florida and elsewhere all across the country. Many advocates of such local, organic agriculture are convinced that we can raise all the food the growing human population of our planet will need on small- to mid-sized, sustainable, organic farms, and I hope we will all do what we can here on the Treasure coast to support such a shift in the way we grow our food.

It is clear to anyone paying attention that humanity is running out of time unless we systematically begin changing the way we relate to our planet – including the way we produce our food.

So, in conclusion this morning, I believe that eating ethically means that we pay attention to what and how (and how much!) we eat, both on the micro and macro levels of our existence...

both in terms of what we take into our own individual bodies...and how humanity as a whole feeds itself.

Here is what I personally intend to do to begin eating more ethically myself. While I am not yet ready (as I have said) to become a pure vegetarian, I do intend to discipline myself to begin observing meatless days, and at the same time to significantly cut the portions of meat – most especially red meat, which takes so much grain to produce – when I do partake of that form of protein.

Similarly, while I am not yet ready to forsake all the wonderful foodstuffs in the grocery stores raised by huge industrial agricultural operations, I will make an effort to patronize small, sustainable, diversified, non-polluting, local farms whenever possible, including our wonderful farmer's market here in Vero Beach every Saturday morning.

And I aspire to always remember the ethical truth that what is good for my own body is also good for the planet. I intend to ever more diligently and responsibly do whatever I can to create health in here in this small, fragile, miraculous body that is mine...and out there in this vast and precious – and fragile – planet that is the home we must protect. Eating is one of the greatest and most primordial pleasures of life...we should enjoy eating every day...but let us increasingly do so with wisdom...responsibility... and restraint.

Wisdom...responsibility...and restraint

Amen.